

SUNDAY, May 23, 1993

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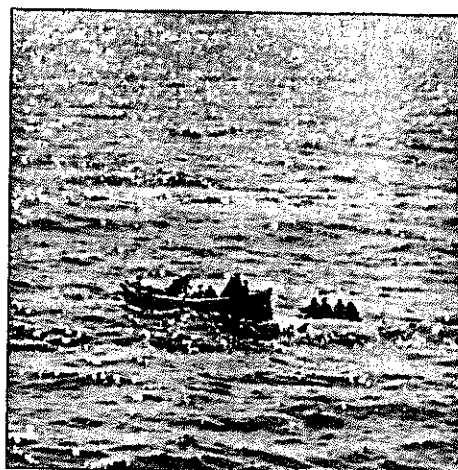
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A whaleboat was sent to rescue the four crew members.



The rescued flight crew climb aboard USS Marblehead.

Adrift at sea



Michael Hughes/The Times-Standard

John Stokes holds a drawing of the B-26 he was flying in when it crashed into the Atlantic Ocean 50 years ago.

Fifty years haven't dimmed Arcatan's memories

By Heather Shelton
The Times-Standard

Fifty years ago, a military aircraft carrying four United States servicemen en route to a war zone in northern Africa crashed into the Atlantic Ocean.

For five days, the crew drifted in a life raft in heavy seas known to be frequented by German submarines. Despite harsh conditions, they survived, and on May 9, 1943, were rescued by a U.S. cruiser.

One of those men was John Stokes, long-time Arcata resident and a lawyer with the firm Stokes, Steeves and Rowe. As the 50th anniversary of this harrowing event rolled by, he reminisced about those five days at sea during the height of World War II.

Back to Nov. 1, 1942: the 25-year-old Stokes had just graduated from flight school. A lieutenant in the U.S. Army Air Corps, he was based in Florida with the 334th Bomb Group Association and assigned to fly a B-26 twin-engine bomber.

"It was very fast and had very short wings," he said. "It landed at a very rapid rate ... It was powerful (with a) 2,000 horsepower engine."

Though it was effective, the B-26 had also been scrutinized during the war for its inability to make safe water landings. By the time Stokes arrived in Florida, eight pilots at the base had already died trying to make emergency water landings.

"When I first got there, I was in the officer's club," he said. "I heard sirens and they said, 'Another one's in the bay.'"

In the spring of '43, Stokes got a call for overseas duty. He would go to northern Africa to help Allied troops evict Axis forces — Germany, Italy, Japan and six other nations — from the region.

■ See RESCUED/C3

RESCUED: In dangerous waters

FROM C1

On May 5, co-pilot Stokes left Florida for north Africa with fellow crew mates, Lt. John Guiher, navigator; Pvt. Harry August, radio operator, and Capt. Cletus Wray, pilot.

The four-man crew would lead a convoy to Marrakech, Morocco, via Puerto Rico, Guyana, Brazil, Ascension Island and Liberia. The trip was going well, Stokes remembered, until the planes arrived in a village near Natal, Brazil. They felt uneasy.

"We were concerned because there was no security around the base," he said.

They also weren't sure who to trust because there were both Allied and Axis forces in the city, Stokes said. They wanted to guard the planes themselves, but local military staff ordered all the men to a briefing session in town.

They went, hesitantly.

The next morning, the men examined the planes. They were fearful equipment had been tampered with, Stokes said, because one of the gauges looked odd. They asked to take test flights.

"They said, 'No.' They thought we were trying to avoid combat," he said. "They told us to take off for Ascension Island or be court marshaled."

One by one, the planes took off over the Atlantic Ocean. Each of the four planes experienced engine trouble triggered by unexpected oil loss. Though some say it was coincidence, Stokes has always speculated foul play.

"My theory is that ... somebody cut the oil line leading to the right engine and placed tape on it so you couldn't see it ... and the line gave out," he said.

One plane crashed in the ocean, killing three of its four crew. A second lost one of its engines, yet made a safe landing. A third began losing oil before take-off and the pilot aborted the flight. Stokes was on the first flight out. His plane began having trouble over the Atlantic about half way to Ascension Island.

"Shortly after the navigator announced passing the point of no return," he said, "one of (the) two engines lost oil pressure and failed."

Because of increased fuel consumption on the remaining engine, the crew knew they couldn't complete the flight. Anticipating a crash landing, they dumped excess supplies and fuel. Still, they knew a safe ocean landing was unlikely.

"Many aircraft had been lost on this leg of the trip," he said, "and none of the crews had been recovered."

To prepare for a crash, Wray lowered air speed to 100 mph, the lowest speed at which the craft could fly, he said. The plane was also heading into a 25 mph wind. This combination cut landing speed to 75 mph, which Stokes believes saved his life.

"When you hit water, it's about like hitting a brick building," he said. "We wouldn't have survived if we'd been going 100 mph. I'll always believe that."

The crash was brutal; both engines were knocked off and the plane broke in two. Still, the four men did survive and swam to a raft that had been released from the plane moments before impact.

They took stock of remaining supplies. "We were very focused on what we were doing. We were trained extensively for



John Stokes collection

Seaplane pilot P.A. Gamache, center, greets the four August, John Stokes, Cletus Wray and John Guiher. The rescued flight crew members. They are, from left, Harry four men were stranded on the Atlantic Ocean for five days.

"Many aircraft had been lost on this leg of the trip, and none of the crews had been recovered ... When you hit water, it's about like hitting a brick building."

— John Stokes

this eventuality," he said.

They weren't prepared, though, for what happened next.

As the men were taking inventory, heavy seas overturned the raft. Except for a can of water and a soggy sandwich, all food and water were swept away.

For the next five days, they drifted — cramped, hungry and tired. Occasionally, they saw planes flying above at high altitudes, but the raft was never seen. Though anxious to be found, the men also feared who their rescuers might be. They were adrift in seas used by enemy vessels.

"We thought our best chance at being rescued was by a German submarine," Stokes said.

On the fourth day at sea, the raft was spotted by a low-flying C-47 commercial aircraft. The C-47 crew tried to drop supplies, but none of the bundles survived the fall. On day five, a seaplane flew overhead, but couldn't land due to high seas. Later that day, they spotted the

cruiser USS Marblehead, which sent a whaleboat to rescue them.

"I was deliriously happy," Stokes said.

"I felt all pumped up. I had this idea to step aboard and salute the bridge, but (my legs were weak) and they had to hold me up."

The men stayed aboard USS Marblehead in sick bay for three days. Once they were rehydrated, they were sent to Recife, Brazil, home base of the ship.

"They took good care of us," Stokes said. "We lounged on the beach ... and recuperated."

After several weeks of relaxation, the men returned to their home base in Florida. Though each went his own way, Stokes kept in touch with two of his three crew mates by mail and at occasional reunions of the 334th Bomb Group Association.

After the rescue, Cletus Wray completed his career in the Air Force. He retired a full colonel and lived in San Antonio,

Texas, until his death in 1991, Stokes said.

In April of '44, John Guiher was on a tour of duty in Europe. On his first mission, his plane was shot down. He spent the rest of the war in a German prison camp, Stokes said. After the war, he was honorably discharged. He now resides in Akron, Ohio, and Arizona.

The last time Stokes saw Harry August was in Recife. He's not sure what happened to him.

After returning to Florida, Stokes was promoted to pilot and became a combat leader. In early '44, he began a tour of duty in Europe, flying 58 missions, 30 in lead. In the spring of '45, he was told he could return to the U.S. He debated whether to go home or stay and keep fighting overseas.

"You can only do something like this for so long. I thought if I did it any longer, I wasn't going to survive," said Stokes, who returned to the States. In July of '45, he retired from the military as a captain.

Stokes went to southern California to work and go to college. Soon after, he enrolled in law school at U.C. Berkeley, graduating in June of 1948. Days later, he and his wife, Edith, moved to Arcata, where he opened a law practice.

The "raft adventure" would never be forgotten.

"It was a very big thing," he said. "I never cease to wonder why I'm still here."

Only human' no excuse for kisses

Nominate a Yo

EAR ANN LANDERS: I read ntly that the University of inia in Charlottesville is con- rine a ban on sexual relation-



immediately afterward and explained, "I want you to know about this in case that young woman tries

Don't get excited, Ann. I don't do her wash, she has been doing it herself since she was in high

CRESCENT CITY — Nominations are now being taken by Rural Human Services for "Youth of the Year" awards.